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24 MAR 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Analysis Branch, ID/CI

FROM : Chief, Publications Staff, OIR

SUBJECT : Release of CIA/RR GM 61-2, Laos,
Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand Zone
of Conflict in Southeast Asia,
14 March 1961, Secret, to Foreign
Governments

1. It is requested that the attached copies of subject report be forwarded as follows:

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2. All OIR responsibilities as defined in the NY memorandum of 13 August 1952, "Procedures for Dissemination of Finished Intelligence to Foreign Governments," as applied to the subject report, have been fulfilled.

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DATE: 24/6/79

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13 Attachments

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Copy No. 350

GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

CIA/RR GM 6I-2
14 March 1961

*LAOS, CAMBODIA, VIETNAM, THAILAND
ZONE OF CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*



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DATE: 24/07/79 REVIEWER:

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

WARNING

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The current critical situation in Laos and South Vietnam emphasizes the primitive character of the environment of Southeast Asia and the strong influence exerted by certain physical and cultural elements. In the underdeveloped areas that have emerged as independent states since the breakup of French Indochina and in the contiguous Khmer Plateau of Thailand, terrain and climate pose formidable obstacles to economic and military activity, and cultural complexity exerts a divisive influence that would materially impede the development of national solidarities.*

Terrain

The terrain of the area from the western limits of the Shensi Plateau to the coast of the South China Sea forms a pattern of alternating highlands and lowlands, oriented approximately north-south. In general, movement in the lowlands is relatively easy, at least during the dry season, but is extremely difficult in the mountainous areas at all times.

The western border of the Shensi Plateau is formed by a series of strong mountain ranges, which traditionally has formed an effective barrier between the Chinese and the more economically advanced central portion of Thailand. As a consequence, the people of the plateau have been oriented outward toward the Chinese. The narrow of the plateau itself is level to undulating and slopes gently to the south and east, toward the Mekong. Because nearly all of the plateau has been level, relief amounts to less than 100 feet and slopes of less than 5 percent, the terrain is itself is generally favorable for cross-country mechanized travel. However, it likely to be limited by seasonal flooding, dense forests of the region, and the ubiquitous rice-paddy dikes, which may be as much as 4 feet in height.

The Mekong Valley, which borders the Shensi Plateau on the north and east, enters the Region from China and extends southward to the South China Sea. North of Vientiane, the stream trough is narrow and, in many places, gorge-like; but to the south the valley becomes much less restricted. Downstream from Vientiane to the Cambodian border the main plateau areas are those surrounding Vientiane and Savannakhet. The former is some 70 by 30 miles in extent and the latter, 100 by 80 miles. Further south, at Nakhon, the valley opens into the wide Chontien plain, which merges with the vast Mekong Delta area. Traditionally, the Mekong Valley has been a main artery for north-south trade routes on the river and along Route 13, which parallels the river. The Khor Plateau and the Shensi Plateau, however, have been a barrier to trade between the lower reaches of the river to Vientiane (important) and deterioration of stretches of Route 13 restrict trade movement, particularly during the rainy season. Locally, the Mekong River remains a very important medium for movement, whether it is north-south along the river or east-west between Laos and the Shensi Plateau.

Rising from the eastern margin of the Mekong Valley is the great highland complex that extends like a "backbone" from the Chinese border throughout the length of Indochina to the margin of the Mekong Delta. This backbone -- comprised of great mountain ranges, large and almost impenetrable limestone areas, and barren plateaus -- is a definite barrier to movement of all types and both economically and culturally has remained very primitive. The five east-west routes that traverse the highland complex follow river valleys -- as in the case of Route 7, which follows the Song Co to the Plain des Arres -- or cross the mountains through passes such as the Mu Gia. The only line north-south road within the highlands is South Vietnamese Route 14 from Chu Phan to Kanton, which follows the relatively level surface of the chain of plateaus between the two settlements.

Many of the highlands and bordering the South China Sea is the coastal lowland, which extends the length of Indochina. This lowland has been the traditional north-south route in the area, and it still offers the best direct line for maritime communication between North and South Vietnam. Although the coastal plain is generally fertile, sections of the adjoining highlands encroach upon it in places, forming bottlenecks or natural lines of defense.

* Throughout this memorandum, the term "Region" has been used in a loose sense to denote those countries that comprised former French Indochina plus the Shensi Plateau in northeast Thailand which has been included primarily for geographic reasons. For more detailed geographic information on the individual countries, see CIA/DP 00-04, North Vietnam, 12 October 1960; CIA/DP 00-05, Laos, 23 September 1959; and CIA/DP 00-06, South Vietnam, 12 October 1960.

Climate

The tropical monsoonal climate, common to the Region, is one of the most restrictive of the physical elements. Characterized by a summer rainy season and a winter dry season, the climate has a strong regulatory effect on the everyday life of the present as well as on military activities.

During the summer rainy season, from about June until September, torrential rains swell the rivers and cause flooding over vast land areas. To the peasant this is the rice growing season, but to those involved in activities dependent on this is a season of frustration. Even main roads may be blocked by mudslides, landslides, and rising streams and secondary roads frequently become almost impassable. Air traffic may be greatly curtailed or completely grounded by the storms and poor visibility. Away from the primary roads, logistics may be dependent entirely upon transport by oxcar or canoe.

With the cessation of the rains in September or October, the rivers shrink and floods recede, the sky becomes clear and relatively cool, and travel conditions are at an optimum. In mountain valleys, however, morning fogs may still restrict air travel.

In March and April, daily temperatures become excessively high, the ground parches, and the atmosphere becomes hazy from the combination of dust and smoke from the fires associated with the "slash and burn" agriculture of the peasants. The haze may be dense enough to prevent air reconnaissance and supply drops.

People

The population of the Region is characterized by ethnographic and related linguistic complexity (see Map 0003). This complexity is reflected in the cultural disparities among the different groups -- disparities which are evidenced by ethnic external manifestations such as recognizable differences in traditional tribal clothing, and serve as deterrents to the achievement of national solidarity.

The sophisticated nationals -- the Thai, Laotians, Cambodians (Khmers), and Vietnamese -- who control the political and economic reins of their respective countries live in the densely settled lowland areas (see Map 0003), which shows population density by province). The many primitive tribal peoples of the Region are sparsely distributed in the adjoining highlands, where there is a recognized altitudinal stratification of the different tribal groups. National boundaries do not effectively separate ethnic groups in the Region, and cultural affinities are likely to outweigh the relatively poorly developed national loyalties.

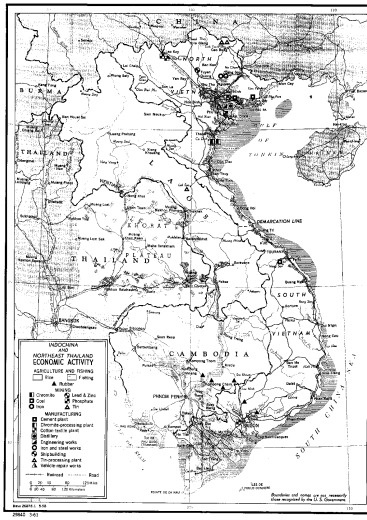
In all of the countries, the sophisticated lowland people have regarded the upland tribal people with disdain, calling them by such derogatory terms as "Hill" (Hill) in Laotian or "Hill" (Hill) in Vietnamese. Government officials and members of the upper classes have regarded them with contempt and have been largely ignorant of their social and economic needs of the tribal people. This attitude of superiority, in turn, has engendered among them a feeling of resentment and often actively toward the national governments and makes them particularly susceptible to antigovernment propaganda.

Buddhism is the dominant religion of the Region, but it is a Buddhist people with a different view. The vast majority of the people are spirit worshippers and are steeped in superstition, even to the official level, where it is the case of the tribes. In a sense, even if they are, for example, attributed superiority to their living ruler, King Le. In Vietnam the majority of the Buddhists are clerics in their belief, following the Confucian ethic in their daily lives. Some Buddhists, with some 1-1/2 million adherents in Vietnam, is the largest non-Buddhist denomination in the Region.

Economy

Agriculture is the dominant economic activity throughout the Region and rice is the predominant crop. In the lowlands the peasant engages in the cultivation of irrigated rice, relying upon both the precipitation and floods of the rainy season for growing his crop. In the highlands the far more primitive and precarious "slash and burn" agriculture prevails, and the peasant depends solely upon

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precipitation for growing his dry rice. The lowlands generally produce a surplus of rice for export** -- the Mekong delta region is normally one of the great surplus "rice bowls" of Asia -- but, in the highlands, crop failure and poor irrigation dikes are not uncommon. Consequently, the lowlands are better able to support large guerrilla bands, such as the Communist Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta.

The case of the chronically poverty-stricken Shensi Plateau is unique. Here, the combination of infertile lateritic soils, an aridist rainfall that is often too little and too late, and primitive agricultural methods, combined with a corollary lack of capital to improve techniques, has resulted in frequent crop failures and poverty. The latter tendencies attributed to the Region may be traced in part to the restricting influence of the environment itself.

The main mineral resources and modern industrial manufacturing facilities of the Region are currently found in North Vietnam (see Map 0004). The resources of the Mekong delta developed by the French at Song Ton, for example, dwarf those of the South Vietnamese deposit at Song Ton. Similarly, the capacity of the textile plant at Song Ton is much larger than the combined capacities of the two recently completed textile plants in South Vietnam, which have a total of some 40,000 spindles. The French-developed Bangkok Cement Plant is still the largest in Southeast Asia. Laos and Cambodia are totally lacking in fossil fuels, mineral resources and manufacturing facilities; although, under a Chinese Communist financial grant, modern facilities for the commercial production of cotton textiles, sugar, alcohol, and cement are being constructed in Cambodia.

Transportation

In most of the area transportation facilities are inadequate for normal traffic even during the dry season (see Map 0003). Their inadequacy is accentuated in the rainy season when traffic is greatly curtailed, even on the main highways. In Laos, which has no rail system, the situation is particularly acute as is indicated by the seasonal closing by government decrees of sections of the main north-south Route 13. Continuous, heavy military traffic would rapidly break down most roads in the Region.

Rivers are important arteries of travel throughout the Region. Generally, their range of navigability and consequently their usefulness is increased by high water during the rainy season.

Air transport also is extremely important to the Region, particularly for supplying remote areas. During the rainy season, however, flying conditions are all but deterioration of landing fields can greatly curtail their utility.

Human Difficulties

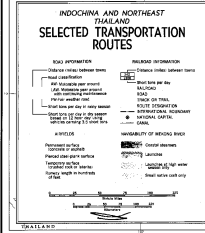
Other a segregated political settlement of the Laotian crisis or an extension of the fighting would be confronted by the inherent complexities of the primitive environment. Any political division would almost certainly be hampered by ethnic difficulties. The situation of the fighting, with the use of larger conventional forces, would involve difficult supply problems, which would become acute during the rainy season. If the current fighting continues into the rainy season, guerrilla-warfare tactics will almost necessarily predominate. Both sides will have logistical problems because severe weather will limit both airspeed and authorized vehicular traffic. In such circumstances, "roads" and aerial transport will be indispensable.

* The lowland Red River delta area of North Vietnam is a notable exception. Historically the crops have failed to meet the needs of the dense population, which has had to import rice.

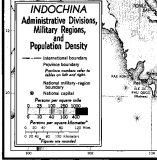
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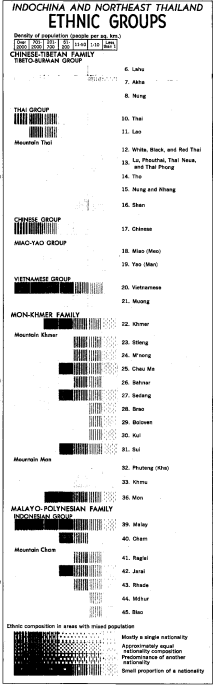
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SOURCE VIETNAM		
An Giang	30	3,820
An Xuyen	37	4,620
Ba Xuyen	21	2,670
Bien Hoa	29	3,600
Binh Dinh	28	3,520
Binh Long	40	5,130
Binh Thuan	16	2,040
Binh Y	17	2,130
Can Tho (Island)	4	500
Dak Nang	12	1,500
Dinh Xuyen	27	3,420
Gia Dinh	20	2,520
Kien Hoa	10	1,260
Kien Giang	9	1,120
Kien Thuy	29	3,600
Kien Phong	29	3,620
Kien Xuyen	26	3,280
Kontum	4	500
Long Dong	15	1,870
Long Hoa	13	1,650
Long Thuan	28	3,520
Long Xuyen	11	1,380
Phu Khanh	22	2,760



NORTH VIETNAM			
Bao Giang	13	1,965	283,352
Bao Kan	4	1,215	85,964
Bac Ninh	12	374	280,787
Ca Bang	2	2,532	274,069
Hao Dong	17	598	882,537
Hoi Giang	1	2,977	199,229
Hoi Nam	19	1,35	180,039
Hai Tinh	25	2,378	659,342
Hai Duong	16	871	894,268
Hue	14	1,213	147,141
Hoa Binh	18	1,494	236,041
Hung Yen	16	299	605,549
Kien An	21	284	442,877
Lang Son	6	2,134	262,999



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